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SUBJECT: NAJAF PROVINCE: THE ISSUES, THE LEADERS, POSSIBLE
STEPS AHEAD

Classified By: Classified by Robert Gilchrist, Political Counselor, for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) Summary: Najaf is dominated by the SCIRI party, which controls half the seats on the PC. As one of the holiest locations in Shi'a Islam, it is also home to the country's top religious leaders. The economy in Najaf continues to flourish as a result of tourism. Security has been relatively stable over the past year to a detente between Badr Corps and JAM militias. Increased engagement by the U.S. with Najaf's political, religious, and cultural establishments could be an important step forward, as would support for moderate centrist parties and the development of a professional civil service. This is one of a series of analyses drafted Provincial Reconstruction Teams, with input from the Embassy, providing overviews of the issues, leaders, and potential steps ahead in each provinces. End Summary

POLITICAL ISSUES

¶2. (SBU) Both national and provincial politics play out in Najaf. As one of the holiest locations for Shi'a Islam, it is the most concentrated site of clerical authority in Iraq and a center of Shi'a political power. Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, considered Iraq's leading Shi'a cleric, lives in Najaf, as do Muqtada al-Sadr, Ayatollah Mohammed al-Yacoubi (the spiritual leader of the Fadhlila party), and Ammar al-Hakim, son of SCIRI leader Abdulaziz al-Hakim. These four figures play important national political roles.

¶3. (SBU) On the provincial level, Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) is the dominant party, holding 20 of the 40 Provincial Council (PC) seats. The Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) party is increasing in strength and may pose a challenge to SCIRI in the next provincial elections. Ayad Allawi's Iraqi National Accord (INA) party is the most viable of the moderate parties, garnering roughly 10 percent of the vote during national and provincial elections (equating to four seats on the PC).

ECONOMIC ISSUES

¶4. (C) The economy in Najaf continues to flourish, as tourism has markedly increased since Iraq's liberation. During major Shia holidays, millions faithful pass through or stop in Najaf to visit the Imam Ali shrine and what Shia Iraqis claim is the world's largest cemetery. Provincial officials have been proactive in luring outside investment.

This eagerness to create international financial relationships has often put the provincial government at odds with the national government. Since spring 2006, provincial officials have worked with DOD and DOS to develop and construct a commercial airport.

SECURITY ISSUES

¶15. (C) The formal transfer over security in Najaf from Coalition Forces to Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC) took place on December 20. Although the Iraqis have had effective control for at least four months, there could be a new perception by anti-Iraqi forces that there is now a more permissive environment for their activities.

¶16. (C) Security in Najaf has been relatively stable over the past 12 months due to a dtente between Badr Corps and Jaysh Al Mahdi (JAM.). While both blocs would like to be in control of Najaf, open conflict appears to be a symbolic red line. Both Badr Corps and JAM present themselves as solely charitable organizations. SCIRI/Badr and JAM/OMS have proposed initiatives expected to be approved by the PC to create Popular Committees in the province, ostensibly to serve as community watch details but which could morph into entities for harassing political enemies. SCIRI is the major influence in the Iraqi police, but there are about 5000 additional police over the number allotted by MOI. SCIRI and OMS have reportedly reached an agreement to place supporters in the IP. This has caused consternation at the national level, but it allows both parties to feel the security apparatus is protecting their interests in Najaf.

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THE KEY POLITICAL PLAYERS

¶17. (C) Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the Hawza. Al-Sistani is the leading figure of Najaf's hawza, Iraq's leading Shi'a religious seminary. Through the release of several statements from June 2003 to December 2004, he played a visible and active role in supporting the development of Iraq's democratic institutions (though not always in the ways the U.S. wanted). He helped form the Shi'a coalition which contested the December 2005 parliamentary elections, and coalition leaders seek his counsel and support on key decisions. Three other grand ayatollahs are also prominent figures in the hawza: Ishaq Fayadh, Basheer al-Najafi, and Mohammed Saed al-Hakim.

¶18. (C) Muqtada al-Sadr. Al-Sadr is a Shi'a cleric and leader in his early 30s who gained political prominence not through his religious learning but by inheriting the religious and charitable networks, and the family prestige, of his father, Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, an activist ayatollah killed by Saddam in 1999. He has a large popular following in Baghdad and southern and central Iraq and leads political and military organizations, namely the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) and the Jasysh al-Mahdi (JAM).

¶19. (C) Ayatollah Mohammed Yacoubi. Yacoubi is the spiritual leader of the Fadhila party. He was a student and follower of Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, and his followers consider him more qualified to continue al-Sadr's activist leadership than Muqtada.

¶10. (C) Ammar al-Hakim. Al-Hakim is the son of Abdulaziz al-Hakim, SCIRI's leader. He leads the Shahid al-Mihrab Foundation, an organization with both charitable and political activities. The al-Hakims are one of Iraq's most prominent clerical families, and Ammar serves as Abdulaziz's key link to the Najaf hawza.

¶11. (S-NF) Najaf Governor Asaad Al Taeef, in office since February 2005, is very western in dress and attitude. He spent 14 years in Denmark, returning after the liberation. He has been a strong partner in reconstruction, but appears to be the face of SCIRI in the province. He has had health problems related to his heart. Deputy Governor Abdul Hussein Abtan (aka Hajji Hassan) is a reputed Iranian intelligence agent. The PRT reports he is gaining political savvy and increasing in stature. Responsible for all security in the province, he was once the local head of Badr Corps.

¶12. (C) PC Chairman Abdul Hussein Mousa Al Mousawi, viewed by the PRT as honest broker, is a strong proponent for reconstruction and has worked closely with US interlocutors. He has been a mediating voice in the PC, but often comes down firmly on the side of SCIRI. IP Provincial Chief Abdul Kareem Al Ameeri was elevated from the Assistant IP position approximately five months ago. His tenure has been relatively secure, but there appears to be some opposition from non-UIA members on the PC who feel he was forced on them.

¶13. (C-NF) Adnan Zurufii was governor during CPA. He is the leader of a moderate party that supports coalition efforts. He is a political force, but has difficulty with funding and has been threatened on a number of occasions by both JAM and Badr. He seeks US support.

COMMENT: POSSIBLE STEPS FORWARD

¶14. (C) Given the national political importance of Najaf and its leading Shi'a residents, increased engagement by the U.S. of its political, religious, and cultural establishments would be an important step forward. While we do not have direct communication with the leading marja'iyah (or clerics, including Ayatollah al-Sistani), we could certainly advance our interests by devoting more resources to engaging Najaf's elite. As of now, our most direct link to Najaf consists of a PRT based in Hillah.

¶15. (C-NF) A major issue at the provincial level will be the continued existence of smaller moderate parties. There should be an effort to imbue these parties with a stronger

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political sense. There must also be training and money. Islamist parties wage very strong campaigns and it's a message that the moderates haven't received as yet. We are not at a place where SCIRI and the Islamists are so entrenched that a fair and secure election won't open the door for other political organizations. The next provincial elections present a last chance in this regard. Security of polling sites will also be important in the next elections. Some parties are able to shepherd their rank and file to the polls while other legitimate parties find road blocks, literally have been set up to make it impossible for many of their constituents to vote.

¶16. (C) One of the most pressing needs in the province is a professional civil service. Any change in a provincial administration would bring with it a wholesale turnover of personnel in bureaucratic positions. The province then risks falling back to a time where logistics and training trumped accomplishment. A possible solution would be short-term training (across parties and sects) for lower and mid-level provincial government employees. We've done well to open police academies. There may be some merit in developing a small civil service academy that would provide basic training for engineers and scientists and accountants so that they would have the ability to work across party lines.
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